

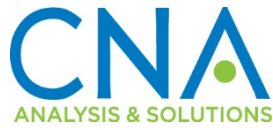
Russia's "Ambiguous Warfare" and Implications for the U.S. Marine Corps

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May 2015



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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "JSchroden".

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Introduction

It has been just over a year since “little green men”—strongly suspected to be Russian Federation soldiers—surged into Crimea and drove out all elements and symbols of Ukrainian authority. Peace now prevails on the Crimean peninsula under Russian control, but as of this writing, war still rages in Ukraine’s eastern region of Donbass, where Russian-backed separatists wielding Russian weapons, driving Russian tanks, and reportedly fighting alongside unacknowledged Russian troops wage war against the Ukrainian military.

In annexing the Crimean peninsula and supporting instability in Ukraine’s eastern provinces, the Russian Federation and its armed forces have used so-called “ambiguous warfare” to great tactical and operational effect. This brand of warfare involves rapidly generating highly trained and disciplined forces who enter the battle space out of uniform and, in coordination with local supporters, utilize psychological operations, intimidation, and bribery to undermine resistance.

While it is unlikely that U.S. Marines will directly confront Russian Federation forces in the near future, other nations and non-state actors who are potential U.S. adversaries (and who Marines may face on the battlefield) are closely observing Russia’s use of ambiguous warfare and will likely modify their own strategy and tactics as a result. Therefore, it behooves the U.S. Marine Corps to understand the lessons from Crimea and Ukraine and how other adversaries might militarily adapt as a result of Russia’s success.

Drawing out the lessons from Crimea and Ukraine involves seeking the answers to a host of questions, including:

- What is “ambiguous warfare”? What was the Russians’ military strategy, and what tactics did they use in their invasion of Crimea and Ukraine? What aspects of their military strategy and tactics were particularly effective and why?
- What aspects of Russia’s actions in Crimea and Ukraine are specific to this particular set of events, and what are generalizable to other situations?
- What are the implications for the U.S. Marine Corps of Russia’s “new generation” of ambiguous warfare in which influence operations are at the center of operational planning and operations?

To help answer these questions, and to deliberately raise a host of additional questions that the Marine Corps should think about going forward, CNA convened a one-day meeting of U.S. and international experts on February 25, 2015, to discuss the implications for the U.S. Marine Corps of Russia's ambiguous warfare. This paper presents a summary of that discussion, which was held under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution to encourage a candid exchange of views.

What Is “Ambiguous Warfare”?

“Ambiguous warfare” is a term that has no proper definition and has been used within U.S. government circles since at least the 1980s. Generally speaking, the term applies in situations in which a state or non-state belligerent actor deploys troops and proxies in a deceptive and confusing manner—with the intent of achieving political and military effects while obscuring the belligerent’s direct participation. Russia’s actions in Crimea and Ukraine clearly align with this concept, though numerous participants pointed out that it is not a new concept for Russia.

The “Gerasimov Doctrine”

Recent events in Crimea and Ukraine were foreshadowed by an article published February 27, 2013, by Russian chief of the general staff Valery Gerasimov in the Russian Academy of Military Science’s *Military-Industrial Courier*, titled “The Value of Science in Prediction.” In his now-seminal article, General Gerasimov urged the academy to study and engage in the formulation of new doctrine and tactics to win the wars of the 21st century. As he explained, the rules of war have changed:¹

In the 21st century we have seen a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template.

The experience of military conflicts—including those connected with the so-called colored revolutions in north Africa and the Middle East—confirm that a perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war.

¹ The quotes here are from a translation of Gerasimov’s article by Robert Coalson, available at <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>, accessed April 21, 2015.

The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness....The broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures....is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special operations forces. The open use of (conventional) forces—often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation—is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict.

Experts in our discussion agreed that the “Gerasimov Doctrine” evolved out of necessity, driven by Russian vulnerability rather than strength. Russia currently perceives itself to be under a pressing external threat from a powerful adversary: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The revised Russian Military Doctrine signed by President Vladimir Putin in December 2014 identifies NATO and NATO enlargement as a fundamental threat to the Russian homeland. Anticipating that the Russian Federation’s largely conscript forces would not prevail against NATO in conventional combat, Gerasimov advocates the use of a modern version of partisan warfare that targets an adversary’s weaknesses and avoids direct, overt confrontations.

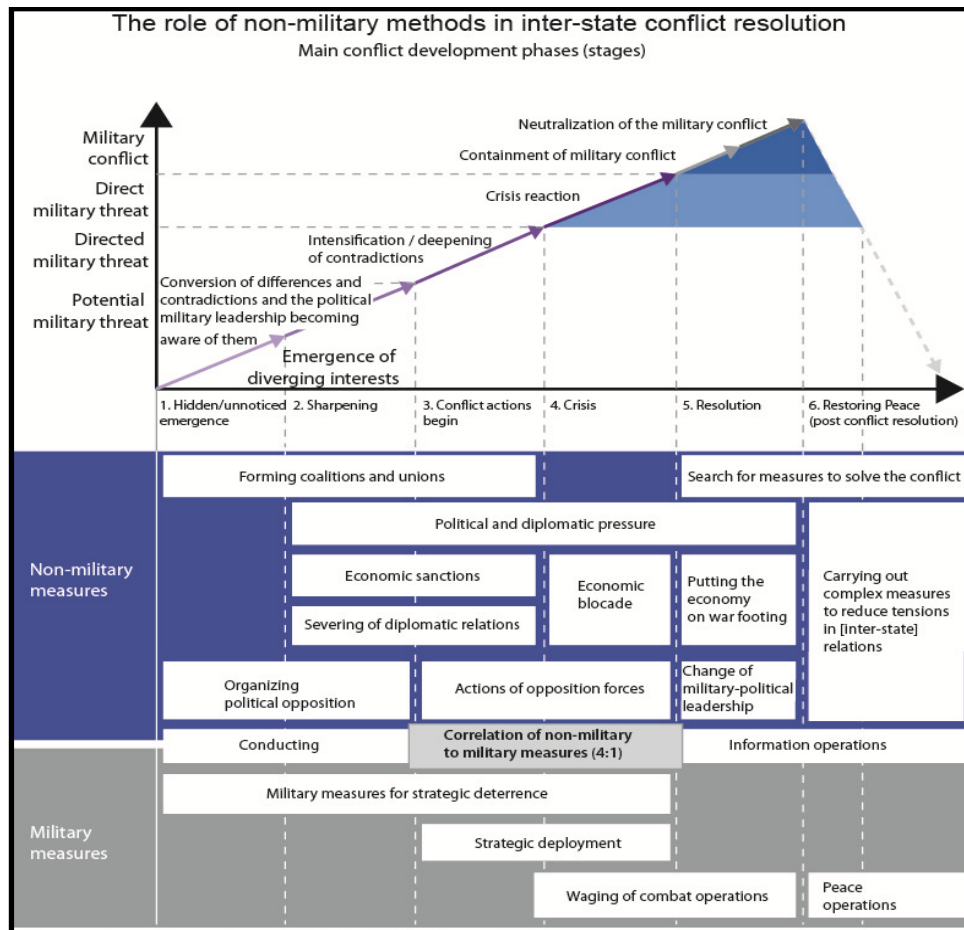
Additionally, Gerasimov proposes a correlation of non-military to military measures of 4 to 1. His non-military measures include efforts to shape the political, economic, and social landscapes of the adversary state through subversion, espionage, and propaganda, potentially in combination with cyberattacks. Grounded in *maskirovka*, the Soviet doctrine of denial and deception, this new employment of ambiguous warfare keeps opponents wondering and hesitating by resolutely denying Russian involvement while working through as many agents as possible. In Ukraine, for example, third-party deniable agents included pro-Russian loyalists and local paramilitary commanders, as well as gangsters who spotted an opportunity for profit and power.

One of the experts in our discussion described Russia’s application of Gerasimov’s concepts as proceeding through six main phases. These are shown in Figure 1 (although the phases are not entirely sequential, as they contain overlapping actions). In the first phase, Russia uses ethnic Russian populations in target states as a “fifth column,” fomenting protests and resistance to the country’s government. These actions have the potential to generate backlash and discrimination against ethnic Russians by the government and majority populations, which in turn can escalate the situation in the target country. In essence, Russia can activate a self-reinforcing mechanism to generate conflict.

In the second phase, Russia uses economic warfare and diplomatic/political pressure to intimidate, coerce, punish, and undermine governments in target states as a

means of further weakening them. In the third phase, Russia infiltrates ambiguous military and security personnel into the target country, and activates criminal and other networks to further foment unrest and ignite open conflict. In the fourth phase, Russia's military engages in a campaign to isolate government positions, seize key terrain, and destroy the defense and security apparatus of the target country. In the fifth phase, Russia conducts information operations to deny involvement and seed doubt and discord in the minds of other foreign governments as to what is occurring and how they might respond. In the sixth and final phase, Russia consolidates its gains in the target country, takes actions to de-escalate the conflict and reduce tensions, and installs a government amenable to Russian influence.

Figure 1. Phases of Russia's ambiguous warfare^a



Source:

^a Niklas Granholm, Johannes Malminen, and Gudrun Persson (eds.), "A Rude Awakening – Ramifications of Russian Aggression Towards Ukraine." Swedish Defence Research Agency, Stockholm, June 2014, p. 33 (available at http://www.foi.se/ReportFiles/foir_3892.pdf, accessed April 21, 2015). Reproduced here with the authors' permission.

As one expert noted, this kind of ambiguous warfare requires the deliberate integration of military and non-military forces, and, while it is a less expensive form of warfare than open, conventional war, it also tends not to lead to a clear military outcome. Another expert commented that credible escalation dominance is a key to making this form of warfare work—Russia has been adept at maintaining a carefully calibrated balance between low-intensity, ambiguous actions and credible, high-intensity (possibly even nuclear) threats.

As participants at our event made clear, Russia's military has put Gerasimov's ideas to good practice in Crimea and Ukraine, though its overwhelming success in Crimea has not been entirely mirrored in events to date in eastern Ukraine.

Russia's Military

To get a better sense of how Russia's military operationalizes Gerasimov's doctrine; participants discussed the structure of the Russian military generally, as well as its special forces (the Spetsnaz) specifically.

Russia's armed forces

At our event, one expert who has studied the Russian military extensively commented that nuclear weapons still play a central role in Russia's strategic thinking. They allow Russia to maintain a credible deterrent against Western action, as well as to put forth a significant threat as part of its fourth phase of ambiguous warfare. Russia also still maintains a sizeable military force with a sizeable reserve. For example, one expert noted that in less than one week, Russia could mobilize about one army (four brigades) and one airborne brigade. That said, Russia's military is spread thin over the longest land border of any single country. Additionally, Russia sees threats in all directions.

As participants in our event discussed, Russia's military is aligned into different military districts. The Western District is the one concerned with Ukraine, and it has a large share of Russia's air force and air defense assets arrayed against possible NATO air threats from the West. The Southern District contains forces in a high state of readiness, and the Eastern District contains forces arrayed to protect the largely unpopulated eastern flank of Russia against potential threats from China. The Central Asia District largely serves as Russia's strategic reserve. The result of this posture is that Russia's military has limited ability to mass forces in any one direction without leaving gaps in the nation's defense elsewhere. From a resource perspective alone, the over-stretched nature of the Russian armed forces makes ambiguous warfare an attractive option because this approach does not require the higher resource demands of a sustained conventional campaign.

In terms of employment, one expert noted that, unlike the West, Russia does not think about employment of its military forces in terms of services (i.e., army, navy, special operations forces). Rather, it thinks about its forces as primarily geared toward "fighting power" or "political impact," and it uses organizational constructs that place fighting power in support of forces for political impact. One of Russia's

major forces for political impact is the Spetsnaz, which one expert discussed in more detail.

The Spetsnaz

Given the covert nature of ambiguous warfare, Russia's special forces—the Spetsnaz—have played a significant role in Russia's operations in Crimea and Ukraine. Historically, the Spetsnaz were mostly concerned with deep reconnaissance, nuclear missions, and disrupting adversary command and control structures in the context of large-scale conventional warfare. In more recent years, they have gone through a painful but ultimately successful adaptation process to fight “small wars” more effectively. One of our presenters discussed this reform process in detail.

Historically, the Russian military lacked a doctrinal base for small wars, which led to significant challenges in Afghanistan and Chechnya. But in the wake of the latter operations, the military began to purposely evolve the Spetsnaz to have a more deliberate role in small wars. In 2011, it re-organized the Spetsnaz to serve as a support element to its ground units, as opposed to its traditional role in support of Russia's main intelligence directorate (the GRU). In 2012, Russia created its own special operations command (the KSO). However, the bureaucratic battles in the Kremlin continued, and by 2013 the Spetsnaz were back working for the GRU. The Sochi Olympics—and the threats of terrorism that accompanied them—were used to justify a major expansion of the Spetsnaz, and all of the Spetsnaz units were brought up to full strength.

One expert said that the Spetsnaz are best thought of as political instruments, vice military units. Additionally, the GRU is a risk-taking organization that routinely works with unorthodox agents and engages in unorthodox operations. While the GRU employs private sector individuals, warlords, mercenaries, and organized crime syndicates in its conduct of ambiguous warfare, the Spetsnaz are perhaps its most important actor and will continue to be so going forward.

All that said, our participants pointed out that, contrary to popular belief, not all Spetsnaz are “Tier 1” operators. Of the approximately 17,000 Spetsnaz, perhaps only 500 are true Tier 1 operators, with as many as 20-30 percent of the total number of Spetsnaz personnel being conscripts. One expert described the Spetsnaz as being akin to the U.S. Army Rangers—light infantry intervention forces.

Russia's Current and Future Application of the Gerasimov Doctrine

With an understanding of ambiguous warfare and Russia's military, participants next turned to a discussion of what has happened in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, what lessons can be drawn from those events, and what Russia's next moves might be.

The Crimea operation

Russia's Crimea operation in late February 2014, apparently long planned as a military option, went relatively smoothly. In a TV special, "Crimea: the Way Home," broadcast in Russia on March 15, 2015 (on the first anniversary of Crimea's disputed independence referendum), Russian president Vladimir Putin boasted that he had given the order on February 22, 2014, to rescue embattled Ukrainian leader Victor Yanukovich (who had just fled Kiev) and to "start working on returning Crimea to Russia." In a September 3, 2014, article in the *Military-Industrial Courier*, cited by the Jamestown Foundation's *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Colonel-General Anatoly Zaitsev enumerated the successes of the Crimea operation:²

- Normal resupply activities for the Russian-leased naval base at Sevastopol formed a convenient cover for the insertion of elite forces and equipment.
- Russian forces maintained strict radio silence, thus foiling NATO monitoring efforts.
- "Partisan teams" from Russia's Spetsnaz and naval infantry forces in unmarked uniforms ("the little green men") moved

² Roger McDermott, "Myth and Reality—A Net Assessment of Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare' Strategy Since the Start of 2014 (Part Two)." *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 185 (October 23, 2014).

quickly throughout the peninsula to take control of key infrastructure.

- These teams sealed off local Ukrainian bases, cutting communications and disorganizing Ukrainian troops' support systems. Simultaneously, information warfare techniques were applied to persuade Ukrainian forces to switch sides.

Ultimately, Russia's operations in Crimea were very successful, resulting in the annexation of key terrain for the Russian military at very low cost. Certainly, these operations surprised the West and have served as a wake-up call regarding Russia's future intentions in the region.

Donbass (Eastern Ukraine)

In April 2014, a pro-Russian insurgency erupted in the Donbass coal-mining region in southeastern Ukraine and quickly increased in speed and intensity. Advised by Russian GRU officers, an odd collection of deniable agents—foreign “volunteers” and paid mercenaries, radical Russian nationalists, local mobsters, former members of the disbanded Ukrainian “Berkut” special police, and others—took control of government institutions and key infrastructure in Luhansk and Donetsk, and proclaimed them independent people's republics. The area, which borders the Russian Federation, is majority Russian-speaking and the heartland of former Ukrainian president Yanukovich's pro-Russian Party of the Regions.

Despite the many factors favoring Moscow's designs on the Donbass, the operation did not go exactly as the experts in our event believe it was planned. The Russians found less support for the separatist agenda in the Donbass than they had expected. The deniable agents who were first handed power in the “Luhansk and Donetsk Republics” were harsh, erratic administrators who often alienated the local population. Military coordination among the separatists was poor, and they used sophisticated Russian-supplied equipment recklessly, as seen in the shoot-down of Malaysian Flight MH-17. Donbass residents able to escape the fighting have done so, by either going to Russia or moving to safer areas in Ukraine.

By massing 40,000 troops on the Russian side of the border, Moscow heightened uncertainty and temporarily paralyzed decision-making within the Kiev government while simultaneously deterring the West from offering significant military aid to Ukraine. Russian forces were able to move back and forth across the border at will, frequently under the cover of white-painted “humanitarian” convoys. In August 2014, the Ukrainian military re-grouped and began to close in on the separatist strongholds in the Donbass. Sixty-five towns and villages were retaken, and it looked as though the military endgame was approaching. At that point, the Russians were forced to

take on clearly visible roles to prevent the defeat of the self-proclaimed republics. All the while, Moscow continued to deny Russian military presence in eastern Ukraine and to employ an unrelenting media campaign to reinforce the narrative that the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine needed to be rescued from right-wing “fascist” extremists and chaos.

In September 2014, talks to halt the fighting in the Donbass were held in Minsk, Belarus, under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Representatives of Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the Donetsk People’s Republic, and the Luhansk People’s Republic signed a protocol known as Minsk I. It failed.

A second ceasefire agreement, negotiated under OSCE auspices at Minsk in February 2015 and known as Minsk II, is currently in place in eastern Ukraine. But the ceasefire is imperfectly observed; Ukraine remains unable to control its border with Russia, and Russian resupply of the separatists continues. Some analysts are predicting further escalation of tensions in the coming months as prelude to a renewed Russia-backed push to create a land bridge between the Russian border and Crimea. Others believe that Russia does not have the wherewithal to expand the conflict zone substantially but will continue to engage in low-intensity conflict in the Donbass region.

Having made multiple trips to the Ukrainian front line in recent months, one of the experts at our event made the following observations pertaining to the ambiguous war in Ukraine:

- Unmanned aerial vehicles and remotely piloted vehicles are all over the battlefield and are indispensable for operational intelligence and tactical targeting. The Russians have now solved and practiced the linkage between these two activities, with only about 10-15 minutes separating drone reconnaissance and strike missions.
- Russian separatists also make extensive use of horrific violence in order to cow populations. Russian separatists have engaged in abductions, torture, assassinations, massed killings, rapes, and execution of prisoners—while videotaping and putting much of these activities on the internet.
- Russia has used the guise of humanitarian convoys to resupply forces in the field. There is a direct, observable correlation between these convoys and increases in separatist activity.
- Russia’s special units (e.g., the Spetsnaz) are contract units, while the majority of its mechanized infantry are conscripts. Russia has observed that the latter do not fight as well and suffer disproportionate casualties, so it is using a host of contract and irregular forces as its ground maneuver units instead.

- The main battle tank, protected by reactive armor, remains central to high-intensity combat; deep armored raids are prevalent on the dispersed battlefield. Reactive armor defeats most single-warhead infantry-fired anti-tank weapons. Few NATO nations have tandem anti-tank warhead missiles capable of penetrating Russian reactive armor (particularly that on the T-90 tank).
- Russia has introduced superior body armor and body armor piercing ammunition, which can defeat normal infantry when combined with night vision and snipers.
- Russian artillery and multiple-rocket launchers have utilized advanced munitions. In combination with target acquisition capabilities provided by remotely piloted vehicles, such munitions have caused 85 percent of all casualties in Ukraine and have proven their ability to reduce battalion-size units to combat ineffectiveness in a single strike.
- Light infantry fighting vehicles cannot survive on the modern high-intensity battlefield—mounted infantry need tank-equivalent protection.
- Modern overlapping dense air defense kept Ukrainian Air Force close air support and attack helicopters out of the battle due to their lack of sophisticated electronic countermeasures and air defense suppression capabilities.
- Armies dependent on national communications networks and without digital radios are vulnerable to jamming, interception, and real-time targeting.

Lessons from Crimea and eastern Ukraine

Participants noted five main lessons from the events in Crimea and eastern Ukraine for countries most vulnerable to Russian aggression:

1. *Russian ambiguous warfare requires fertile soil.* Russian-sponsored operations have been more successful where they have had support from large ethnic Russian populations, and have fallen short where these conditions do not exist.
2. *Moscow's aggression is planned, not impulsive.* Its operations in Ukraine were planned and prepared well in advance, and Moscow may have similar plans for former Soviet states.
3. *Russia still fears NATO, and will avoid a blatant Article V trigger.* Its advent of ambiguous warfare stems from its overall weakness, vice strength, relative to

NATO. But Russia's lack of traditional state power should not be equated to a lack of serious threat.

4. *Credible, integrated military and security forces are a must.* Ukraine had underfunded its military since the end of Cold War, failed to modernize its forces, and constantly hobbled its own efforts by tolerating corruption. Steps taken to eliminate conscription had a negative impact on morale and military effectiveness. Countries with aggressive neighbors should heed this lesson. Further, potential target states should foster collaboration, cooperation, and connectivity between and within their military forces and their security services, as well as with military and security forces of stronger states such as the United States.
5. *States at risk of Russian aggression should work to better integrate Russian minorities.* These populations are a clear entry point for Moscow into the internal affairs of neighboring states.

Russia's next moves?

Russia's overall aim, explained one European expert, is to replace the current Western-dominated world order with one in which great powers divide the world into internationally recognized spheres of influence. Seizing pieces of Ukraine will probably not be "enough" to achieve this goal. Participants discussed two possible next arenas for continued Russian aggression.

The Baltic States

The three small Baltic Republics, formerly part of the Soviet Union and home to sizable populations of Russian speakers, are potential next targets. With standing armed forces of about 5,000-10,000 troops each, the Baltic States certainly perceive themselves to be vulnerable despite being members of NATO. Russian aggression against the Baltics, should it come, would likely take the form of ambiguous, destabilizing operations in order to avoid triggering NATO's Article V, which views an attack on one NATO state as an attack on all. Indeed, sowing doubt about Western resolve to defend the Baltic States contributes to Moscow's goal of undermining the NATO Alliance.

When the Baltic Republics joined NATO, they were encouraged to develop niche military specialties rather than worry about territorial defense, which was thought unnecessary. This mistake is being addressed, but fixing it will take time. The national armed forces of Lithuania, for example, currently have no mandate to intervene in internal affairs; that is the responsibility of the police and the Ministry

of Interior. These civilian forces would be the first to respond to an influx of the “little green men” who suddenly appeared in Crimea in 2014. Lithuania is now seeking to develop a more comprehensive defense plan coordinating all national bodies of executive power. In January 2015, the Lithuanian Ministry of Defense released a pamphlet titled “How to act in extreme situations or instances of war,” intended to instruct Lithuanians on how to survive foreign occupation and organize nonviolent resistance.

Black Sea region

Russian seizure of the Crimea and continuing military operations in eastern Ukraine have changed the strategic balance in the Black Sea region. With Moscow’s military presence no longer constrained by former legal agreements with Ukraine, it can fully utilize Crimea as a platform for power projection. The Russian Air Force has gained access to former Ukrainian air bases in the peninsula. Russian media reported that the Ministry of Defense plans to deploy to Crimea in 2016 ten Tupolev 22M3 bombers. Both the Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile systems already believed to be deployed in the region and the Tupolev bombers are dual-capable systems (conventional and nuclear). An ambitious modernization program underway for the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, will add six new frigates, six new submarines, several smaller naval vessels, and possibly a Mistral amphibious assault ship if and when it is delivered to the Russians by the French shipyard. Enhanced anti-ship and anti-aircraft capabilities of the fleet and other military units in Crimea will create a strong line of defense for the Russian homeland. Russia’s air defense systems in Crimea reach nearly half of the Black Sea, and its surface attack systems reach almost all of the Black Sea area.

Historically, a Russian military build-up of this size on the northern shore of the Black Sea would be of great concern to Turkey. However, the prospect of Russian-Turkish collaboration on energy may prove a critical factor in mitigating Turkish concerns. Vladimir Putin recently announced that he would abandon the plan to build the South Stream pipeline for Russian gas under the Black Sea to Bulgaria and would instead redirect the pipeline construction to link with existing Turkish systems. One of the experts at our event observed that Russian companies are investing in shipping companies and port facilities on the Turkish Black Sea coast. These commercial ventures are useful for intelligence gathering and could also be entry points for Russian forces should the need arise.

NATO members Romania and Bulgaria, and Partnership for Peace members Moldova and Georgia, look to NATO and, in various ways, to the European Union for reassurance about their security. All four countries are on the receiving end of active Russian influence operations. Bulgaria, heavily dependent on Russia for energy supplies and maintenance of its military equipment, was subject to intense pressure to go forward with its long-planned role as the entry point for the South Stream gas

pipeline, but Washington and Brussels prevailed. Both Moldova and Georgia are hobbled by Moscow's control over the pro-Russian separatist enclaves of Transnistria (sandwiched between Moldova and Ukraine) and of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (located within Georgia's internationally recognized national borders). The latter two enclaves just signed strategic agreements giving Russia formal control over their foreign and security affairs. Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia are also focal points for Russia-linked organized crime in the region. One expert noted that the melding of local gangsters with Russian-backed forces has led to a metastasizing of organized crime in eastern Ukraine, and suggested that we can anticipate further strengthening and utilization of criminal networks around the Black Sea littoral region.

The Future of Ambiguous Warfare: Implications for the U.S. Marine Corps

With an understanding of Russia's use of ambiguous warfare in Crimea and Ukraine, participants discussed the implications for the Marine Corps. Our event was designed to raise more questions than it answered, and this goal was certainly realized over the course of our discussion. As participants noted, the events in Crimea and Ukraine have a number of implications for the Marine Corps.

Understanding ambiguous warfare

Participants noted that the Marine Corps needs to understand and study the Gerasimov Doctrine as it has been applied in Crimea and Ukraine, but also needs to view it more conceptually. Marines should be asking questions such as:

- How did the Russians arrive at this doctrine? How has it been applied?
- Where has it been successful and where has it failed? What lessons are the Russians learning from its application?
- What lessons are other possible adversary states learning from Russia's actions?

Additionally, Marines should look at actions in other theaters (e.g., China's use of coast guard and fishery vessels in the South China Sea) through the lens of ambiguous warfare, in order to understand how other potential adversaries might adapt Gerasimov's concepts for their own use.

Return to high-intensity conflict

The ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine has shown that, while ambiguous, this type of warfare can be highly kinetic and extremely intense. Participants noted instances of battalion-size forces being rendered combat ineffective in a single wave of artillery strikes. Participants asked:

- What kind of expeditionary crisis response force does the Marine Corps need in order to be successful in this kind of environment?
- What does combined arms and maneuver warfare look like in this environment, where the United States will have lost much of its technological edge, along with its air and information superiority?
- Can modern Marine Corps infantry survive on this kind of battlefield? What impact will sustained, high rates of casualties have on the way we fight, especially given political sensitivities?
- Are the armored vehicles being used and developed by the Marine Corps survivable on the modern battlefield?
- Who will the Marine Corps' partners be in this kind of fight? How will Marines integrate with local partners and other Joint forces (e.g., special operations forces) to operate on an ambiguous battlefield?

Fighting in the information environment

Moscow has displayed its ability to launch covert and overt information operations on a mass scale, thereby messaging to global, regional, and local audiences. It has also shown the ability to rapidly spread carefully crafted lies and disinformation to generate discord at local and international levels. Participants asked:

- How will the U.S. Marine Corps' Military Information Support Operations (MISO) counter hostile messaging in an ambiguous warfare theater?
- How will counter-messaging efforts early in the enemy's campaign (street protests, agitation, and subversion) differ from what they will be later in the campaign (open warfare)?
- How will political and strategic decisions limit and constrict the use of MISO by Marines on the battlefield?

Political and economic subversion

Participants noted that, because the initial phases of ambiguous warfare are often hard to detect, maintaining persistent presence in at-risk countries is one way of sensing the application of Gerasimov's concepts. With that in mind, participants wondered:

- How can USMC forces work with allied and partner nations to counter political and economic subversion in at-risk countries?
- What ties can the Marine Corps and larger U.S. military build with allied military, security, intelligence, or policing institutions in a steady-state, pre-conflict environment to try and prevent ambiguous conflicts from arising?
- Do Marines need more cultural knowledge to be successful in ambiguous warfare, especially in its early phases? Do they need more education and training on how to build and sustain relationships with local actors?

Official versus non-official armed forces

Participants noted the complicated network of “ambiguous actors” that Russia has employed in Crimea and Ukraine, to include irregular and proxy forces, special forces, militias, criminal syndicates, and unidentified regular military forces. Participants wondered:

- How will future adversaries challenge and exploit U.S. rules of engagement via the twinning of non-official and official forces?

Conclusion

Participants in our event saw clearly the importance of understanding Russia's employment of ambiguous warfare in Crimea and Ukraine, and thinking through what it might mean for future Marine Corps force structure, capabilities, operations, and tactics. In particular, participants saw Russia's use of population shaping measures in the pre-hostilities phase (to include leveraging Russian-speaking populations in target countries); its use of a mélange of ambiguous actors—to include special forces, militias, and criminal elements, along with resupply missions disguised as humanitarian assistance convoys; and its deliberate use of disinformation and misinformation pertaining to events on the ground, as being particularly effective components of Russia's ambiguous warfare strategy. Participants also pointed to Russia's use of unmanned aerial vehicles to provide near-real time targeting information for artillery strikes; its use of reactive armor; its use of horrific violence to intimidate and subdue local populations; and its use of advanced munitions, as particularly effective tactics on the ground. Thinking more broadly, participants saw these elements of Russia's strategy and tactics as being generalizable to other regions of the world and employable by other potential adversaries of the United States, to include China and Iran.

In discussing the implications of Russia's ambiguous warfare to the Marine Corps, participants felt that the "ambiguousness" of Russia's approach is mostly at the strategic level. At the tactical level, the actions of Russia's panoply of forces are no less ambiguous than what Marines have faced from insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan. As such, participants felt that the basic principles of Marine Corps warfighting remain valid in this kind of environment. However, participants also noted that the situation in Ukraine – while ambiguous in attribution – still amounts to state-sponsored warfare, with a high intensity battlefield that looks significantly different than what Marines have faced in Iraq or Afghanistan. To be successful in this environment, Marines will need to think through how to apply their warfighting principles on a battlefield which may include: the loss of air, fire, and information superiority; rapid fluctuations between low- and high-intensity (and highly lethal) actions; significant increases in the number of casualties; fighting within and among populations that have been subjected to extreme violence; and unlimited adversary warfare in the information space. As one expert asked, "If the Corps gets the call to fight, how will it overcome the loss of the advantages it has enjoyed in recent years?" Answering this question is perhaps the best way for the Marine Corps to prepare for the employment of ambiguous warfare by other potential adversaries in the future.

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